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Covert Action and Provocation

1. A major function of a covert action or campaign of covert actions--like 34A, Mongoose, or the contras--may be to provoke, or to simulate, an opponent's action which will be used to "provoke," rationalize, or justify to the American public/Congress/allies a major escalation or aggressive or illegal/immoral action.

2. This provocation function is highly secret, and is rarely understood even within the wider government circles in which the campaign itself is known to be under consideration or underway. It is rarely disclosed to the public even when the existence of the covert campaign becomes known to the public.

3. Lacking knowledge of the provocation function, an observer or critic of the campaign is likely to find it puzzling, mysterious, paradoxical, an expression of irrationality or "bureaucratic madness," since one can imagine no (other) aim or function of the campaign that one could reasonably expect both to be achieved and to justify the cost or risk of the effort. The internal justifications that turn up in the records or testimony of officials fail to meet either of these criteria.

Hypotheses that suggest themselves is that officials became subject to wildly unreasonable, wishful expectations of effectiveness, or else that the program was a bureaucratic compromise, a sop to those who wanted more forceful action while reflecting the reservations and fear of commitment of the President or advisors close to him.

A third possibility to be considered is that the campaign is intended as a covert threat to the opponent, demonstrating a willingness to break the law or treaty commitments and suggesting a readiness to go further if necessary.

Yet another possible function, rarely considered, is that the campaign may lay the groundwork for carrying out threats or plans of escalation. It may provoke fears and reactions within the opponent's society that will justify more overt threats and preparations for escalation.

Thus, the contra operation was intended, in part, to provoke mobilization, repression, anti-American rhetoric and arms buildup--preferably, and eventually necessarily, from the Soviets--in the Sandinista leadership. It did have these effects, thus justifying "defensive" preparations in Honduras by the US and a Congressional and public perception that the Sandinistas were an evil presence and a menace, that they "had to go," and that more forceful measures, from a boycott to invasion, might be justified.

A further effect, foreseen and desired by some, is within the US itself. The campaign leads to building up covert action capability (in the case of Afghanistan and the contras, restoring it after period of cuts) and to increasing the influence in government circles of the managers of covert action, who tend to be relatively harder-line anti-Communists disposed to more forceful action if necessary. The process of getting agreement on the covert campaign, within the government and (since oversight has been expanded) in Congress, also creates a consensus that vital interests are involved, that "something must be done" and that illegal action is justified: and possibly more if necessary. (This was a major effect of the contra campaign).

But the possibility considered here is that the campaign may be hoped eventually to provoke, or permit a plausible simulation of an opponent's action that will be used to "trigger" a major US/allied initiative that will be presented as a justified or at least understandable "response."

4. All of these may apply in a given case, in the minds of different officials or agencies, and even within the mind of a particular official.

In the case of 34A, the campaign actually did trigger an action by the North Vietnamese--a "threatening" approach of a North Vietnamese patrol boat on August 2, 1964 to an American destroyer actually within what the North Vietnamese claimed as territorial waters--which could be presented as an attack to the American public and Congress.

The immediate response was to resume the patrol with an additional destroyer and with preparations for more air cover. This was explained as merely asserting US rights of free passage of the seas, "daring" the Vietnamese to repeat their "aggression." (Note the exact similarity to Reagan's operations off Libya, on several occasions in the '70's).

What the public did not know was that (as in the later case of Libya) further Vietnamese "attack" was desired as a rationale for carrying out US airstrike plans long-prepared, both to counter Goldwater's campaign calls for more forceful action and to demonstrate a willingness to carry out specific threats of escalation being made covertly at that time to the Hanoi leadership.

Moreover, the first incident made credible in the minds of the destroyer captains and crews the likelihood of further attacks by the Vietnamese. (The captains, like their superiors, were aware of the continuation of provocative attacks on North Vietnam by 34A operations during their patrol). Hence, ambiguous sonar signals

and sightings (during a night of near-zero visibility) were interpreted as an attack, just long enough for Washington decision-makers to commit themselves to a "response", which in turn provided the context for the President to ask and get a long-desired open-ended commitment from Congress to prevent "further aggression," a blank check for the escalation being secretly prepared.

In turn, the combination of continued secret threats to the Vietnamese, actual buildup of US airstrike capabilities in Vietnam (not very visible to the US public), and the Tonkin Gulf raids, provoked the NLF (or DRV) into attacks, for the first time, on US facilities in Vietnam, starting with a major attack on Bien Hoa airfield, where bombing planes had just arrived.

Though the President chose not to "respond" to these "provocations" just before the election, or on Christmas Eve, it was in this context that his advisors could be confident that "Pleikus are like streetcars." (Pleiku and Qui Nhon, attacks on which were the rationale for starting Rolling Thunder, were also airfields).

NOTES:

--Does a covert campaign inevitably commit a President to take further escalation if necessary? No. See JFK's refusal to allow further air raids or to provide air cover as the Bay of Pigs failed. Or LBJ's refusal to respond to attacks on Bien Hoa or the Brink BOQ, despite pressure to do so.

--Was there a difference between LBJ and JFK in commitment to not-losing in Vietnam? Yes. see JFK's refusal, under pressure, to express a definite commitment to this goal either in secret government directives or publicly. And his refusal to send combat troops, under pressure, in 1961. (And possibly, his decision to get rid of Diem and his brother). (And see RFK to me on his determination not to send combat forces, stemming from his own observation of French experience). LBJ, from early 1961 on, was on the other side of these issues.

--Is planning, preparation, and desire to escalate by McNamara and others tantamount to approval by the President? No. McNamara, like LBJ, was on the other side of each of the above proposed commitments, and was overruled by JFK. Nor was even LBJ quick to accept McNamara's pressure for Rolling Thunder as a strategy.

--Thus, agreement in Honolulu, just before JFK's death, by McNamara and military leaders on a covert campaign against North Vietnam did not assure that JFK would undertake this (though I think he probably would have). Nor would his acceptance ensure that he would have carried out either the Tonkin Gulf raids (though he might well have) or Rolling Thunder (much less likely). (JFK is not known to have had the same degree of aversion to bombing

attacks, still less covert operations, that he did to combat forces in Vietnam: but the latter were a fairly clear successor to Rolling Thunder).

--Was there a difference in JFK's and LBJ's attitudes to right-wing military dictatorships in Latin America as instruments of US policy? Yes. LBJ would not have put so much emphasis on the desirability of a Bosch or Frei regime, even if a Castro could be avoided. Just before JFK's death, military coups had overthrown civilian regimes in Honduras and the Dominican Republic. JFK had refused (? or at any rate, had not yet agreed) to recognize them; Thomas Mann, under LBJ, recognized them immediately. Also, LBJ quickly replaced the more neutralist Minh regime in Vietnam with Khanh, who favored escalation and accepted American direction (at first. Khanh was quickly replaced, he claims, when he entertained negotiations).

--It is now clear from the Mongoose documents and the October 1962 planning uncovered by Hershberg that, contrary to published accounts, JFK did not at all rule out direct American attack or invasion of Cuba after the Bay of Pigs.

Yet another function of a covert campaign can be to keep a hardline faction inside the government and its outside allies on board or in line by the tacit promise that more forceful action is not ruled out and may be forthcoming. This was probably one function of all three of the campaigns considered here. The existence of such a campaign does not necessarily mean that the President has decided to go further under any circumstances. He might even have decided privately that he will not, under any foreseeable circumstances.

On the other hand, the latter negative intention is hostage to circumstances, including the President's staying in office (JFK emphasized this contingency to O'Donnell in 1962, with respect to Vietnam) and staying alive (JFK failed this) in Vietnam) and in full control of himself and his forces (this was at risk in the Cuban Missile Crisis). The latter may be difficult in view of the enemy responses that the campaign does provoke, the "set" created within the government, and pressures to act created by the preparations and threats (e.g., the "disposal problem" before the Bay of Pigs, and presented by the contra buildup in Honduras).

Thus, the existence of Mongoose does not guarantee that the President was really contemplating invasion as a likelihood or even possibility early in 1962; though the urgent secret planning in October (under new circumstances, and the pressure of the campaign issue) has a strong flavor that he was at least seriously considering it then. At that point, the appearance of the Soviet missiles--unexpected by JFK--must have created in him intense, ambivalent tension: enormous bureaucratic and political pressure to carry out the already-prepared attack plans, and overwhelming

inhibition against doing so.

Secret preparations for both blockade and attack--thus keeping on board the military and civilian hardliners determined to attack--and then blockading and making overt threats and preparations for attack, JFK then made highly secret overtures--successfully concealed for 27 years even with the government, revealed only by Dobrynin in Moscow--to settle the conflict by trading Cuban and Turkish missiles. At the point when this private offer was, in effect, accepted publicly by the Soviets (Saturday morning) JFK temporarily lost control of his ExComm, who--ignorant of his secret proposal of the trade--strongly opposed his expressed willingness to "accept" the "Soviet" proposal. He postponed accepting this resolution for at least 24 hours (not, probably, much longer, as his secret instructions to Rusk on the "Cordier/U Thant ploy" indicates), during which both he and Khrushchev might well have lost control of events to the initiative of Castro and his anti-aircraft gunners. (Not realizing that Khrushchev had lost control of Castro, JFK did not realize that it was necessary, despite his warning to Khrushchev, to desist from sending low-level reconnaissance over Cuba while he awaited an answer to his Saturday night bluff/ultimatum).

--All of these reflections were stimulated by this week's preoccupation with the Indonesian coup: i.e., the real coup, by Suharto (and certainly, the US, with probably help from Japanese and perhaps others). The critical covert action was the "Untung attempted/abortive coup," simulating a PKI action, or constituting an action that Suharto could plausibly claim to believe was a PKI action (and which Nasution may actually have been misled to believe, at least temporarily, was PKI-inspired), thus rationalizing the dual campaigns of decapitating the PKI--killing several thousand of its leaders--and exterminating a large part of its mass support, while pushing aside Sukarno (without killing him).

The covert action trigger not only explained and "justified" the subsequent massacre and takeover by the Suharto faction of generals, but itself eliminated the military faction that was the main obstacle to this program, in its loyalty to Sukarno and/or opposition to such bloody measures.

The mass "popular, spontaneous" attacks on actual and alleged supporters of the PKI not only consolidated the destruction of PKI political power but they served to obscure the active role of the Indonesian military and thus provide an additional cover for the US role. As in the case of supposedly unofficial "private, rightwing death squads" in Latin and Central America, the cover provides plausible denial not only of any Presidential, or US, active responsibility but of active responsibility of US/Congressionally-supported military regime or forces.

Those in the government who were sincerely pessimistic about preventing PKI advances, under Sukarno sponsorship, earlier in 1965, were presumably looking at Nasution's unwillingness to move against Sukarno, or against the PKI in absence of approval from Sukarno, assuming Nasution to be unassailably able to veto a military initiative (like Yani, who opposed it). What they presumably failed to contemplate was a USG ruthlessness adequate to countenance and encourage a violent displacement of Yani--in a way that would not trigger civil war, i.e., by an allegedly PKI-inspired murder of Yani and his military allies--and that would either remove Nasution or make him an ally in the displacement of Sukarno (supposedly an ally of the murders) and the annihilation of the PKI.

Was JFK ruthless enough for that? We don't know. He accepted the killing of Trujillo, attempts to kill Castro, and the killing of Diem: the first two, enemies, the latter, a Catholic ally (that he had long supported) who had become politically embarrassing. He prepared, threatened, and contemplated at least the possibility of large-scale war in Cuba (in Mongoose and during the Missile Crisis) and in Indochina. But he did not actually commit, or directly contemplate, any massacres.

By the time of the Indonesian massacre, however, LBJ--and the subordinates he had inherited from JFK--had been bombing Vietnam for nine months (to be sure, with unusual "care" to minimize civilian casualties in the North) and had undertaken an openended commitment to massive troop escalation in Vietnam.

Indeed, as David Johnson suggested to me yesterday, Colby and others witting of our involvement in the Indonesian massacre (Halperin thinks this might well not have included McNamara and Rusk, though it might have) may have thought of themselves as averting a similar large-scale civil war, perhaps leading to American involvement, in Indonesia. Others may have comforted themselves, in the words of a military officers quoted by Kathy Kadane, that the PKI would have done the same if they had come to power. (This is, in fact, extremely unlikely, in view of the specific nature of the Indonesian Party and its tactics, its sponsorship within Indonesian society, and its path to power: wholly unlike that of the Chinese, Cambodian or Vietnamese Parties).

Other examples of "provocation plans": the Reichstag Fire; 34A and the Tonkin Gulf (and the air buildup inside South Vietnam in the fall of 1964); Track II in Chile in 1970, a direct parallel to the Gestapu action in Indonesia, with the removal of Schneider (= Yani, a Chief of Staff reluctant to move against the political leader or Constitution or to annihilate the Communists, his murder or kidnapping to be blamed on the Left and used as the excuse for a military takeover and annihilation campaign: with Pinochet finally playing the Suharto role, after direct evocation of the

Indonesian example in the warnings, "Djakarta is coming" to both reluctant generals and to the Left); US naval and aviation maneuvers and "patrols" close offshore Libya; the search for a Libyan connection to a "terrorist" incident (finally exploiting one as ambiguous, and probably as invalid, as the Tonkin Gulf "attack", likewise based on alleged comint); Hitler's simulation of Polish attacks on German border posts, September 1, 1939 (and earlier, his stimulation and simulation of Czech harassment of Sudetan Germans); contra terrorism in Nicaragua, to stimulate Nicaraguan "invasion" of Honduras; readiness to carry out leadership assassinations in Nicaragua to provoke Sandinista responses that would justify attacks or invasion; planting of "Sandinista" arms ships for El Salvador, like earlier "North Vietnamese" arms ship planted off South Vietnam in February 1965.

Finally, my new discovery: a De Soto patrol offshore Cuba at the start of the Missile Crisis, almost surely sent there as part of the October planning before the missiles were discovered, potentially to provoke a Cuban attack--or to claim one, as in August 1964--that would justify US attack or invasion.

Moreover, preparations to simulate (or provoke) a Cuban attack on Guantanamo, both before the Bay of Pigs (possibly without JFK's knowledge, to force his commitment: though conceivably, with his knowledge, to give him the option: to strengthen the effect of the "occupied beachhead" at the Bay of Pigs) and during Mongoose: with Mongoose activities being augmented in October. (Even on October 16; this is ambiguous. Was it simply inertia, the meeting having been scheduled before RFK learned of the missiles, that morning?)

Consider also, in this context, the presence of a "mother ship" off Nicaragua during the mining of Corinto (though this was covert) and of a provocative Naval presence off Nicaragua. Likewise the presence of the US Navy off Cuba in 1961, Brazil in 1964, off Vietnam in 1954, off Guatemala in 1954, and off Indonesia in 1958, Jordan in 1970. All these were to be ready to give support; but they were also in position to be "attacked," if that could be provoked or claimed. This potential was realized in Vietnam in 1964 and off Libya, twice, in the '80s.

There was also the attacks on various reconnaissance vehicles, with a potential for escalation that was not unwelcome to various officials, though not, ultimately, the President: the EC-121 in Korea, 1969, the capture of the Pueblo in 1968, the attack on the Liberty in 1967, the shootdown of the U2 in 1960 (which aborted the Paris Summit, at which Eisenhower would probably have made major concessions on Berlin).

(Similarly, on the Soviet side, invasions of Czechoslovakia and of Afghanistan prevented imminent possibilities of major arms control agreements, an effect that may not have seemed tragic to some Soviet military intelligence agencies who were interpreting

ambiguous risks and giving advise, in the role of Admiral US Grant in the Tonkin Gulf incident or the CIA officials urging the necessity of a U2 flight over Russia just before the Summit).

And then there is Panama! And Grenada: protecting the students. Indeed, David Johnson has begun to wonder about possible CIA influence on the Grenadan military who killed Maurice Bishop!